

THE CLASSROOM VILLAGE AT PARADISE ADVENTIST ACADEMY

The year is 1875. The 8th-graders in Paradise, California, are not studying *about* westward expansion—they are *part* of that expansion. They are intimately involved with all the risks and opportunities of life on the prairie at a time when native Americans could be hostile, climate changes could wreak havoc on crops, and labor shortages could drive up costs.

Issues being decided by this class are real-life ones—government, management, child care, immigrant concerns, agriculture, ethics, and technology. Indeed, even survival cannot be taken for granted. “Death” can mean an inability to participate for the duration of the unit and a tragic loss to the village community.

David Vixie hesitates to call his classroom village a “simulation” and almost bristles at the words “role play.” Both descriptions suggest the idea of pretending and imaginary activity. To the contrary, students in his classroom village make significant decisions with real consequences. When someone becomes bankrupt, for example, this adversely affects the entire class community. This way, students live what they learn, rather than studying a concept that is far removed from their experience.

Vixie, who has won several teaching awards, became interested in the simulation approach some years ago when his wife, also a teacher, attended an exciting seminar on simulation. Thereafter, education in Vixie’s class was not only preparation for life—it *was* life!

For example, an 8th-grader who forgot to bring his assignments from home discovered that without these “immigration documents,” he could not clear customs and begin life in the New World of

the simulated classroom. The student therefore had to spend the rest of his day in a nearby classroom. Banishment is a severe consequence for carelessness, so the student was asked to write a creative depiction of what life felt like in a solitary environment. The result was a brilliant essay made all the more poignant by being written by someone trapped outside of the community for an entire day. Its experience of the real and immediate is the secret of the classroom village.

The classroom village integrates a number of subject areas, just as in real life. History is combined with science, and business and language with Bible. Writing is a part of every subject. And students have a lot to write about.

One of the biggest challenges in using the classroom village as a curriculum strategy is the creativity required for its preparation, so that students see the experience as much more than fun and games. The environment itself becomes the instructional medium.

Picture Removed

While on a several-day camping trip in the 19th-century wagon they rebuilt, David Vixie and his 8th-grade students rest at an authentic campsite on a major 1849 trail to California.

Picture Removed

These students have just claimed a three-foot-by-three-foot-square plot of floor space on their simulated classroom prairie, where they will attempt to homestead the scale-model 160-acre farm. Land Agent David Vixie (teacher) stands in the back.

What is the impact of the classroom village? Based upon the written testimonials of graduates, the students look back on their experiences there as some of the most significant memories of their schooling. After helping to set up and manage a simulated business, one student actually bought a business at age 16 and operated it—based upon the principles learned in the classroom village. Another student who learned similar business principles was asked by his family to take over business operations on the family farm at age 16!

Does the classroom village use Seventh-day Adventist curriculum guides and textbooks? Absolutely! In fact, they are the basis of what is taught in this simulated environment. The challenge for the teacher is to order and organize the curriculum so it can be applied seamlessly to a real-life context. Instead of paper-and-pencil tests, Vixie relies heavily upon written work to measure students' understanding and mastery. Essays and reaction papers form a prominent part of his assessment. It's hard work, but infinitely rewarding, according to Vixie, whose ideas have caught on with parents, other teachers, and the administration of his school. ✍

Picture
Removed

During a science simulation, students research dinosaurs at a schoolyard archaeological site where they attempt to assemble excavated bones. They will later display the model in their classroom museum.

Pictures Removed

This student's desk becomes a covered wagon as he participates in a simulation of the immigrant trails.

High above the classroom peasants sit the queen and prince of the kingdom. The smaller castle to the right is ruled by a vassal lord and lady.